

The Ethics of Seeing: 20th Century German Documentary Photography Reconsidered

Call for Papers

Paul Betts, University of Sussex; Jennifer Evans, Carleton University; Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, University of California, Berkeley 23.05.2013-25.05.2013, London, German Historical Institute

Deadline: 15.01.2012

Recent years have witnessed new interest among historians to integrate visual sources and changing modes of visual perception into their work. While the presence of visual sources in mainstream monographs was quite common in 19th century historiography, this tendency dropped off markedly over the course of the 20th century. In the last fifteen years or so, however, historians working in various contexts have begun to rethink historical periods - and history-making itself - through the lens of visual history as a rich field of scholarly inquiry in its own right. But to date this burgeoning field associated with the 'visual turn' largely exists as a set of isolated studies that rarely relate to one another; the proposed conference is an effort to bring together a range of scholars in the field to explore the interface of visibility and history in 20th century Germany. Of central consideration here is how and why photographic images have shaped popular memories and understanding of key historical events over the last century; in relation to German history, this is certainly evident with the both world wars, the 1923 Inflation, the pageantry surrounding the Third Reich, the Holocaust, Nazi defeat, divided Berlin, 1968, the 1972 Olympics as well as the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

This conference goes beyond the highlights of Germany's visual culture more generally, or simply affirming how photography illustrated the main political trends of the period. Rather, it aims to explore the role and centrality of documentary photography as a source of historical knowledge over the course of the last century. To what extent did photography capture Germany's dramatic century in photographs? How did photographers chronicle social worlds in radical transformation, serving as both witnesses and reformers across various contexts? Germany is a particularly revealing site to broach these issues, given the dizzying series of regime changes over the course of the last century and the role that photographic images have played in capturing these political and social upheavals. Poverty and injustice, for instance, were favourite themes among photographers from the late 19th century onward, but their meanings changed significantly depending on political regime and social context - ranging from leftist agitprop in the interwar years to inter-German photographic rivalry during the Cold War. Likewise, the representations of crime, urban life and domesticity shifted fundamentally over the decades, and the same goes for pictures of soldiers' lives, be it in combat during both world wars or as peacetime soldiers in West and East Germany after 1949. Official photographs could shore up state power while hastily shot images from protesters and photojournalists often cast doubt on the government's moral authority to govern.

Iconic images and the canon of famous photographers - spanning August Sander to Helga Paris - will certainly be considered here, but less in terms of individual careers than with the aim to investigate how photographers captured historical sentiments across genres, stylistic boundaries and mass

media. As a result, photography exhibitions will be discussed alongside illustrated magazines, posters and police files in order to address how image-makers of the period gave visual form to the pressing concerns of the day.

Of particular emphasis will be the theme of humanism, which was a source of wide discussion from the early 1920s through the 1960s and beyond. Implicit in the term was the will and need to picture of the human condition, with an eye to using photography as a means of social and political reform. This was certainly evident in the Weimar years with the stress on the camera as a weapon in the campaign for social change, and found echoes in the Third Reich's efforts to glorify or denigrate certain groups or types as standing in for new ideas of humanity in the 1930s. After 1945 humanism became part of the ideological arsenal of the West, as this revived realism was elevated as a new iconography of a post-fascist aesthetic of simplicity and individualized fates, as noted in the work of the MAGNUM group and the 1955 exhibition, Family of Man.

Whilst such pictorial representation drew heavy criticism from Soviet authorities, on the grounds that such a 'bourgeois' style masked class conflict and thus vitiated true social change and progress, GDR photographers, for their part, found occasion to explore the theme of humanist photography in new and subtle ways from the late 1950s onward. Sometimes the camera became an instrument of self-criticism, while at other times it was used to chronicle the supposed misery and injustice of life on the enemy side of the Iron Curtain.

With this in mind, the conference is not only interested in thinking about how key historical events were depicted in the photographic realm. Attention will additionally be placed on how documentary photographs acquire meaning in different cultural circumstances and across various media. And we will examine the ways in which visuality brings into being new relationships of power and authority over what is acknowledged as history. Of paramount concern is the way the visual arena changed how people made sense of the events of the 20th century, ushering in new forms of representation, perceptual experiences and fresh modes of narrating the past.

The conference will take place at the German Historical Institute London and will be co-sponsored by the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam. The costs for meals and accommodation of all participants will be covered. Limited funding for travel costs is available. Participants are strongly encouraged to seek support for travel from their home institutions.

If you are interested in presenting a paper, please send a short abstract of your proposed paper (max. 500 words), an abstract of your ongoing research related to the subject of the conference (max. 1000 words) as well as your abridged curriculum vitae. The deadline for submissions is February 15, 2012.

Please address all queries and abstracts to the conference organizers:

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